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ABSTRACT

Self-consciously activist education has a long history among African-Americans; however, it is one of the least well-understood aspects of African American struggle. This paper addresses one chapter in that history, the Freedom Schools that operated in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 and for a while thereafter. The schools were the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a coalition of the civil-rights organizations working in Mississippi. From 1961-64, the SNCC and COFO waged a campaign for African-Americans' right to vote. The idea for the schools came from Charlie Cobb, a Howard University student. The schools marked a turning point in the radicalization of the SNCC in that they became part of a larger discussion of parallel institutions. If American institutions would not work for black people, African-Americans would create institutions that would. The Freedom Schools offered traditional subjects that were often unavailable in black schools, such as citizenship and cultural-awareness education. It would be interesting to have some discussion about how one would adapt the Freedom School model to the current time. The need remains for lessons about language and power, black history, the causes and costs of mindless materialism, gender-based oppression, and the linkages between racism and sexism. (Contains 18 references.) (LMI)

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EDUCATION FOR ACTIVISM: MISSISSIPPI'S FREEDOM SCHOOLS IN THE 1960s

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Education for Activism[1]

In 1927, soon after she arrived in New York fresh out of Shaw University, Ella Baker started a class in Negro history at the Harlem YMCA. In 1929, Charles Hamilton Houston (Phi Beta Kappa at Amherst, first Black man to serve on the Harvard Law Review) became Dean of Howard University's Law School and immediately set about making it an instrument of struggle. A lawyer, he liked to say, is either a social engineer or parasite. He fired faculty who could not keep up and flunked out students in droves. Thurgood Marshall came in with a class of 30, 8 or 10 of whom made it to graduation. Houston's motto was "No tea for the feeble, No crepe for the dead." The legal talent that made possible the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown V. Board decision was nurtured -- if that is the word for what they endured -- largely at Howard. In 1932, Myles Horton opened the Highlander Folk School in the Tennessee mountains which, for the next several decades, would train Blacks and whites as union organizers, community leaders and civil rights activists. One of the projects which best exemplified Highlander's spirit was the Citizenship Schools that Septima Clark developed while she was Highlander's Director of Education. At one level, the Citizenship Schools taught people how to register to vote but Miss Clark always understood that as a means to the more significant end of developing community leadership. (Kluger, 1977; Horton, 1990; Grant, forthcoming).

Self-consciously activist education has a long history among African Americans but it is one of the least well-understood aspects of African American struggle. This essay addresses one chapter in that history, the Freedom schools that operated in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 and for a while thereafter.

Organizationally, the schools were the creation of SNCC-COFO. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had entered Mississippi in the summer of 1961 and shortly thereafter helped form the Council of Federated Organizations, a coalition of the civil rights organizations working in the state for which SNCC provided the bulk of the manpower. From 1961 to 1964, SNCC-COFO waged a valiant campaign for the right to vote. Mississippi whites responded with violence, sometimes lethal, against individual civil rights workers, with constant police harassment and by wholesale firings and evictions of people thought to be associated with the movement. In effect, the Federal government shrugged at all of it, including the murder. For some in SNCC, the last straw was the January, 1964 murder of Louis Allen in McComb. Allen had earlier witnessed the slaying of NAACP member Herbert Lee and it was that which probably led to his own killing. At the time Allen was killed, SNCC-COFO was in the midst of discussing the possibility of bringing large numbers of white students into the state for the subsequent summer partly because they had noticed that when white students had been in the state that fall to help with a Freedom Vote, the movement got far more attention from the press and the FBI than was normally the case. In the context of the killing of Allen and several others, it was decided

that something had to be done to make the Federal government take a larger hand. (Dittmer 1994, Payne 1995)

The something turned out to be the Mississippi Summer Project, bringing nearly 1,000 young people to the state, mostly white and well-to-do, the kind of people, Ella Baker noted, who could bring the concern of the nation with them, the kind of people the Federal government was likely to try to protect and in protecting them they would also be offering some measure of protection to the activists based in the state. The volunteers were expected to run voter registration campaigns, operate community centers and conduct Freedom schools.

The idea for the schools came from Charlie Cobb, a Howard University student who had been in Mississippi since 1962. During one of the early planning sessions for the summer, Cobb proposed that the Summer Project do something to address the impoverished nature of the education typically offered Black students in Mississippi. The education the state offered white youth was nothing to brag about but what it offered Black students was outrageous, underresourced in every way imaginable -- teacher salary, length of the school year, instructional materials, facilities. The city of Hattiesburg was spending $115 for each white child and $61 for each Black child; in Magnolia it was $59 against $1.35; in McComb, it was just $30 for every white child's education but just 76 cents for every Black child. (Holt 1965, p. 102)

Freedom Schools

Obvious inequalities aside, Cobb, very much in the spirit of SNCC, was also concerned that many Black classrooms were autocratic in tone, stressing rote memorization, not the kind of teaching likely to stimulate intellectual curiosity (Dittmer:1995, Cobb 1991). As Cobb wrote:

> Repression is the law; oppression a way of life
> ...Here, an idea of your own is a subversion that must
> be squelched; for each bit of intellectual initiative
> represents the threat of a probe into the why of denial.
> Learning here means only learning to stay in your place.
> ....There is hope and there is dissatisfaction...This is
> the generation that has silently made the vow of no more raped
> mothers, no more castrated fathers; that looks for an
> alternative to a lifetime of bent, burnt, and broken backs,
> minds and souls. Their creativity must be molded from the
> rhythm of a muttered "white son-of-a-bitch;" from the roar
> of a hunger bloated belly and from the stench of rain and
> mudwashed shacks...What they must see is the link between
> a rotting shack and a rotting America. (Quoted in Howe, 1984, p. 9).

Thus, Cobb wanted a component in the Summer Project that would "fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions...to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teachers a real question...[to] make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action." (Cobb, 1991, p.36)[2]

The schools marked a turning point in the radicalization of SNCC in that they became part of a larger discussion of parallel institutions. If American institutions do not work for Black people let us create institutions -- political parties, unions, coops - that will. The increasing focus on institutions meant that SNCC was moving away from understanding American racism as just a matter of some white Americans having backwards attitudes. (Fruchter, 1969; Dittmer, 1995, p. 259)

Cobb envisioned the schools handling perhaps a 1,000 students of high school age. In fact, somewhere over twenty-five hundred students actually showed up and their ages ranged from seven to seventy. Many of the students were coming without the knowledge or approval of their parents. The number of schools was increased from 25 to 41.

Part of the classwork consisted of traditional academic subjects. In Mississippi, though, traditional subjects were often not available in Black schools. Publicly-supported Black schools tended not to offer typing, foreign languages, art, drama or college preparatory

mathematics. Apart from whatever intrinsic interest they held, these subjects were popular with students partly because they symbolized equality (an interesting contrast to an era when some Black students equate academic success with "acting white.") Teachers were encouraged to use a Socratic style of teaching; asking questions that drew on the experiences of students and trying to help them develop a larger perspective. Volunteers who were professional teachers often had more trouble adjusting to the teaching styles than did the inexperienced.

When the students at Mt. Nebo School in Jackson walked into their first class they were greeted by a tall white woman who

> pointed to herself and said, Je m'appelle Wendy Heil," then walked over to a student and asked, "Comment vous appellez-vous?" The joy was electrifying as the first student guessed and replied, "Ida Bell Johnson!" And then from that small beginning without a word of English during the whole class, Wendy picked up objects, pronounced the French names in exaggerated fashion, and had the students repeat them.

Class ended with a reverberating "We Shall Overcome," sung in Mississippi French. (Holt, p. 111)

Sally Belfrage describes a Freedom School scene in Greenwood:

The children sat in small groups under trees on the lawn or on the steps of the church. More than a dozen were learning to speak French with a drawl; nearby, half as many were studying Spanish; and a group of three, German....A few yards away another half dozen were conducting a creative writing class.... Their teacher was asking them to describe the difference between two stones, a rough light one and a smooth dark one. By the end of the summer they had their own mimeographed newspaper, Freedom Carrier, and had written and performed a play. (Belfrage, 1965, p. 90)

At their best the schools were an electric experience for teachers and students alike:

[From Holly Spring] The atmosphere in class is unbelievable. It is what every teacher dreams about -- real, honest enthusiasm and desire to learn anything and everything. The girls come to class of their own free will. They respond to everything that is said. They are excited about learning. They drain me of everything that I have to offer....

[From Meridian] If reading levels are not always the highest, the "philosophical" understanding is almost alarming: some of the things that our

> 11 and 12 year olds will come out with would never be expected from someone of that age in the North... (Sutherland, 1965, pp. 93, 96)

Elizabeth Sutherland, who edited a collection of letters from voulunteers noted that:

> Classes in voter registration work and political play-acting were a success everywhere. With innate sophistication about their own plight, the kids pretended to be a Congressional Committee discussing the pro's and con's of a bill to raise Negro wages and "the con's" would discover neat parliamentary tricks for tabling it. Or they'd act out Senator Stennis and his wife having cocktails with Senator and Mrs. Eastland, all talking about their "uppity niggers." Sometimes they played white cops at the courthouse, clobbering applicants with rolled-up newspapers. (Sutherland, 1965, pp. 102)

Not only did they understand the positions of Southern racists, but some of the youngsters knew a little about the temporizing of Northern liberals as well. One Greenwood boy in a role play, got President Kennedy to T, down to the Boston accent: "The Federal government is not empowahed to act." (Belfrage, 1965, p. 90.).[3] Another role playing project had students study history by role playing three generations in the life of a Negro family.

Role -playing was also an important part of the Citizenship Curriculum, the most distinctive component of the curriculum. It was built around a set of core questions, including:

1. What does the majority culture have that we want?

2. What does the majority culture have that we don't want?

3. What do we have that we want to keep?

One unit of the curriculum asked students to compare their social reality with that of others in terms of education, housing and employment; one section in particular called for them to compare the adjustment of Negroes to Mississippi with the adjustment of Jews to Nazi Germany. The "Introducing the Power Structure" unit tried "to create an awareness that some people profit by the pain of others or by misleading them." The unit on poor whites tried to help students understand how the power structure manipulated the fears of poor whites as much as it manipulated Negroes. "Material Things and Soul Things" was a critique of materialism.

The last area of the citizenship curriculum was a study of the movement itself. The section on nonviolence made sure to present it as something beyond a mere refraining from doing anyone physical harm; they were admonished to practice nonviolence of speech and thought as well. Always they were being encouraged to understand the relationship between their individual situation and broader societal questions. Always they were being encouraged to develop a new understanding of their capacity for change. The curriculum reflects how far discussion within SNCC had progressed beyond a narrow concern with civil rights. A full analysis of society was embedded in the thinking behind the schools.

Freedom Schools

Belfrage, a volunteer in Greenwood, tells the story of Amanda, who had flunked the registration test five times before she came to the Freedom School to learn to read. She was out of work at the time and "so poor that she couldn't afford a cigarette and would take one of mine with the gratitude of one just handed a fortune." She finally found a job but got fired two days later. She had been hearing at mass meetings that people from distant places all over the world were supporting the movement. Her employer was from Texas, which sounded pretty distant to Amanda, so she asked her employer if she ever went to mass meetings. The white lady fired her on the spot. Amanda showed up crying at the Freedom School that night.

> By the end of the summer, she knew a great deal, though not much of it was reading. She would rush to finish the day's allotted letters, then ask me questions about the movement, FDP, the world; the questions has stimulated others by the next lesson, but she had forgotten the letters we had done and they had to be repeated. We never got as far as "w," but Amanda became a block captain. (Belfrage, 1995, p. 94).

The schools were more successful in rural areas or in those urban areas where the movement had been strong. With so little for youngsters to do in rural areas, the schools became the focal point of teenage social life and an activity in which whole communities felt

invested. ("When the Freedom School staff arrived in Carthage, the entire Negro community was assembled at the church to greet them; when, two days later the staff was evicted from its school, the community again appeared with pick up trucks to help move the library to a new school site.") In urban areas with little movement history and alternative ways for young people to spend their time, places like Greenville or Gulfport, it was much more difficult for the schools to have an impact. (Holt, 1965, pp. 317-9)

There is some suggestive anecdotal evidence about the political effectiveness of the schools. In August, students from around the state held a conference at which they worked on the platform for MFDP's youth program. The conference was held in Meridian in part because Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman had been killed while trying to establish a Freedom School near Meridian. After the idea of a convention had been approved by the Freedom School "coordinators" (i.e., principals, a term which may have sounded too hierarchical for SNCC), the youngsters essentially took over the planning and logistics. During the actual convention, "there was a noticeable change in tone between the first and second days. By Sunday, these teenagers were rejecting the advice of adults ...for they had discovered they could do it themselves." (Lynd 1969) Bob Moses, one of the movement's staunchest advocates of teaching people to make their own decisions, was there. Staughton Lynd, statewide Freedom School coordinator (in which position he spent less than $2,000 all summer, over half of that for films) said "it was the single time in my life that I have seen

Bob happiest. He just ate it up....He just thought that was what it was all about." (Dittmer, p. 260)

The kids developed guidelines for housing, education and health programs, suggested that repressive school districts be boycotted and after a particularly bitter debate decided not to endorse a boycott of Cuba. They further resolved:

> 1. The United States should stop supporting dictatorships in other countries and should support that government which the majority of the people want.
>
> 2. Whereas the policy of apartheid in the Republic of South Africa is detrimental to all the people of that country and against the concepts of equality and justice, we ask that the United States impose economic sanctions in order to end this policy. (Holt, p. 119)

In Philadelphia, where Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman had actually been killed, students returned to school wearing "ONE MAN, ONE VOTE" buttons. In Issaquena-Sharkey counties, after the principal told them they could not wear their SNCC buttons, students launched a boycott that lasted eight months.

The summer of '64 represented a high point for this form of activist education. They continued for at least another year in Mississippi. In the late 1960s and early '70s, many radical political groups, the Panthers included, developed some form of liberation schools. The current popularity of Civil Rights tours for young people represents one contemporary

parallel. (Murray and Garrido, 1995) Boston's Freedom Summer Project draws explictly on the Freedom Schools in its educational activities.[4] There are certainly some parallels between contemporary Afrocentric schools and the Freedom Schools, particularly in their common emphasis on community uplift and individual responsibility for it. [5]

It's interesting to note that within the movement, Freedom School work always had relatively low status value. At least in part this was because women did much of it and because it wasn't as dangerous as other work. Voter registration work, on the other hand, held the highest status value.

With 30 years of hindsight, we can say that of all the traditions, customs, practices that grew out of the movement, it is a particular tragedy that we do more to build on this tradition of explicitly helping African American youngsters to construct a political identity for themselves. Why weren't they continued more aggressively? The best guess seems to be impatience, a sense that more dramatic kinds of activism were more important. Early in the summer, a Freedom School teacher in Shaw wrote in frustration:

> Furthermore [the kids] don't see how we can help them to be free. At this point, neither do we. Slow change is unthinkable when so much change is needed, when there is so much hurt...Things are so terrible here that I want to change it all NOW. I mean this as sincerely as I can. Running a freedom

> school is an absurd waste of time. I don't want to sit around in a classroom; I want to go out and throw a few office buildings, not to injure people but to shake them up, destroy their stolen property, convince them we mean business. ...I really can't stand it here. (Sutherland, 1965, pp. 100-101)

In part the Freedom School model got lost in the desire to do something bigger, something that would have more impact sooner. Associated with that, of course, in all probability was the tendency to be seduced by media politics, a style of politics for which Freedom Schools are badly suited.

It would be interesting to have some discussion about how one would adapt the Freedom School model to our time. At first glance, I am struck by how little of the basic intellectual framework needs to be changed. The need for teaching Black history is certainly as strong as ever. The lessons about language and power that were taught in Freedom Schools were far more sophisticated than almost anything I heard in the recent, exceedingly shallow discussions of "ebonics." Certainly, there is a much greater need now for young people to understand the causes and costs of mindless materialism. Mass media have become so much a part of our lives that perhaps a unit would be needed to cover that. We would certainly want to encourage youngsters to think about gender-based oppression, about the links and parallels between racism and sexism. In inner city communities, I believe it is vital that young people be helped to be analytical about the patterns of interaction among

themselves, often characterized by constant insult and personal attacks. They need to see, to paraphrase Cobb, the links between the way this country attacks their sense of self-worth and the way they attack each other.

One of the obvious differences might be the absence of movement context. Young people going to Freedom Schools were surrounded by activists who genuinely believed that they could change the flow of history and that confidence must have been magnetic. They grew up wanting to be SNCC field secretaries. We would need to think very carefully about how to give young people some comparable sense of their own potency and comparably clear models for actualizing it.

The Freedom School as a model of social action may actually be more pertinent to our times than they were to the Mississippi of the three decades ago. Strange though it may sound, young Black people probably had more opportunities for some form of political education then than their counterparts do now. In the context of our times, a moment in history at which to those of us who are old enough to remember the sixties, young Black people seem confused and rootless, it is obvious, whether one thinks from the viewpoint of the NAACP or the Black Revolutionary Army, that we should have been far more aggressive about continuing explicit attempts at the social and political education of our youngsters.

That we haven't done so may suggest that we are still very much confused about the

Freedom Schools

potentials and the limitations of the sixties. The decade remains one of our major metaphors for social change but we often preserve the wrong parts of it -- the sizzle and not substance --- we remember the drama, the demonstrations -- and forget the notion of individual development as being one of the keys to shaping a more just society. Radical-progressive-nationalist or whatever, we are still Americans, with an historical consciousness attuned to Hollywood, prone to understanding history as drama, prone to underestimating the long-term importance of determined, sustained non-dramatic action. Perhaps the memory of the Freedom Schools serves us best as cautionary tale. Perhaps what we most need to remember is that the price for confusing the flashier manifestations of activism with its substance is a kind of self-alienation in which we lose the ability to do those very things which might sustain us, we lose even the ability to recognize them.

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1. This paper is a revised version of Chapter 10 of my I've Got The Light of Freedom. I am at work on a further revision which will have more discussion of contemporary analogues of the Freedom Schools.

2.Check sources.

3. Rothschild, A Case of Black and White, (pp. 95-96, 112-3) suggests that the 1964 version of the schools were somewhat more traditionally academic and less political than had been intended but that changed for those schools which remained through the winter of 1964 and the summer of 1965. The volunteers who stayed through that period she contends were more political than those available during the summer of '64.

4.Boston Freedom Summer can be reached at 411 Washington Street, Dorchester, MA, 02124.

5. A fair number of Afrocentric schools seem to offer traditional, teacher-centered pedagogy and in some cases exactly the kind of autocratic classroom ethos Cobb was trying to find an alternative for, suggesting a departure from SNCC's tendency to want to liberate both the community and the individual.